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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5620  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3562  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 4095  
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000966

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S EBRIMMER  
P FOR AWELLS/RWALLER  
DRL/NESA FOR JBARGHOUT  
PARIS FOR DNOBLES  
USUN FOR AWOLFF/EGERMAIN/ASCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR DSHAPIRO/MMCDERMOTT  
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OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/26/2019

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION CRITICIZES HARIRI'S NEGOTIATION TACTICS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Although many speculate that cabinet formation is being held up by external Syrian or Iranian influence, opposition figures claim that the reason for the delay is Hariri's refusal to provide a counteroffer to General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement's original proposal on the ministries that it desires. The FPM bitterly complains that Hariri has used proxies in the media to corner the party while refusing to engage it in direct negotiations. Although the technique has been successful in painting controversial figure (and Aoun son-in-law) Gibran Bassil as the block to cabinet formation, Hariri has radicalized the dialog and deeply offended the notoriously stubborn and emotion General Aoun, Aoun's nephew and FPM MP Alain Aoun told us. Hariri does not appreciate the stubbornness of Michel Aoun, Alain insisted, and falsely believes that Hizballah or Syria can or will force him to concede. All sides are now looking for a solution that will save face for everyone involved, though Hariri will likely have to reach out to Michel Aoun personally to clear the bad blood. While Hariri has succeeded in cornering the FPM and identifying it as the obstacle to government formation, it is clear that touchy and vindictive Michel Aoun has made the once-political dispute into a personal one, especially since his heir-apparent has been targeted. End summary.

OPPOSITION CRITICIZES HARIRI'S  
CAMPAIGN AGAINST BASSIL

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¶2. (C) Members of the March 8 opposition coalition tell us that the delay in cabinet formation is due to Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri's refusal to respond to FPM leader Michel Aoun's proposal for his cabinet bloc. Although Hariri quickly negotiated ministerial portfolio distribution with Hizballah and Amal, negotiations with the FPM have been delayed by the party's elevated demands, starting with proportional representation in the cabinet based on the number of seats in the parliament and, once that issue was shelved, extending to the eligibility of Aoun's son-in-law, righthand man, and caretaker Minister of Telecommunications

Gibran Bassil to return in the next cabinet. (Note: Hariri's objection to Bassil, while never publicly stated by him personally in the press, is that he lost his seat in the recent parliamentary elections. End note.) The conflict, once contained behind closed doors, has blossomed into a full-fledged media war.

13. (C) Although many speculate that cabinet formation is being held up by external Syrian or Iranian influence, on August 26 FPM MP Alain Aoun told polchief tat the simple reason for the delay is Hariri's refusal to provide a counteroffer to the FPM's original proposal on the ministries that it desires. Marwan Kheireddine and Marwan Abu Fadel, both advisors to Druze opposition figure Talal Arslan, made the same claim. Alain Aoun bitterly complained that Hariri has used proxies in the media to corner the FPM while refusing to engage it in direct negotiations. Although the technique has been successful in isolating the figure of Bassil in the public mind as the block to cabinet formation, Hariri has radicalized the dialog and deeply offended the notoriously stubborn and emotion General Aoun, Alain reported. As a result, he said, Aoun will reject any progress on talks until Hariri achieves a "psychological breakthrough" with him, preferably with a personal meeting. Alain Aoun dismissed Hariri's recent public dinner invitation to the FPM leader because it was accompanied by a simultaneous indirect media campaign blitz against him. Hariri does not appreciate the stubbornness of Michel Aoun, Alain insisted, and falsely believes that Hizballah or Syria can or will force him to concede. Abu Fadel and Kheireddine seconded Aoun's assessment that Hizballah cannot now move

BEIRUT 00000966 002 OF 003

Aoun even if it wanted to do so.

AOUN: HARIRI "TOO SMART"

14. (C) Alain Aoun displayed dismay over Hariri's negotiation techniques because he had taken the opposition's good will and ruined it. According to Aoun, the FPM surrendered its initial insistence on proportional representation under Hizballah pressure, thus allowing the 15-5-10 formula to coalesce. The opposition then proposed to Hariri that the two sides agree on ministry distribution and only after that the names of the ministers. This offer was a gesture of good will, Aoun claimed, and Hariri was "too smart" and botched the entire process by prematurely objecting to including Bassil as a minister. Although Hariri had quickly negotiated with Hizballah and Amal only on portfolios, he changed the rules for the FPM, Aoun complained, with his campaign against Bassil even though the FPM never reached the stage of submitting its list of ministerial candidates. Now negotiations have reached a "dead end" and what was a local dispute is being leveraged by regional actors for their purposes. Abu Fadel claimed that Hariri is not being proactive and is instead waiting for regional developments, such as the issuance of summons from the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), to pressure the local opposition. Hariri has told the opposition, Abu Fadel alleged, that the opposition should give him the government he wants and in exchange he will provide regional cover for the opposition vis-a-vis the STL. The irony, Abu Fadel pointed out, is that Hariri's strategy is encouraging Hizballah, Syria, and Iran to watch and wait as well, forcing Hariri to call in Saudi pressure to resolve what began as mere local issues.

ALL SIDES LOOK FOR AN EXIT

15. (C) All sides are now looking for a solution that will save face for everyone involved, Aoun reported. One unlikely option is to shuffle all of the ministerial portfolios among the parties and start at the beginning. All of the opposition parties were content to maintain the portfolio distribution of the previous cabinet, Aoun reported, but such

a mixing could provide an exit. Another suggestion is for Hariri to offer the FPM an additional "sovereign" ministry or to up the number of offered ministries to five from the four that the FPM is now assumed to deserve (in addition to a minister of state without portfolio). Were he to do so, both sides could claim victory because the FPM could drop either its demand that Bassil return to the Ministry of Telecommunications or its more recent demand for the Ministry of the Interior, which is now part of the president's bloc. In either case, he underscored, Hariri will have to reach out to Michel Aoun personally to clear the bad blood. Alain Aoun and Gibran Bassil's ongoing contacts with the PM-designate's advisor Nader Hariri will not be enough to bridge the impasse, he judged.

COMMENT

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16. (C) It is unclear whether tight-lipped Hariri misstepped in his negotiations with the FPM or whether he is purposely trying to isolate and undermine the party before forcing its partners to make it concede. While he has succeeded in cornering the FPM and painting it as the obstacle to government formation, it is clear that touchy and vindictive Michel Aoun has made the once-political dispute into a personal one, especially since his heir-apparent Gibran Bassil has been targeted. Although being excluded from the cabinet may play well for the FPM during municipal elections next spring, opposition sources say that locking the largest Christian party out of the cabinet would be a destabilizing factor. At the same time, they concur that external parties, should they become motivated to prod Michel Aoun to compromise, may not be a match for his bullheadedness.

BEIRUT 00000966 003 OF 003

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